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ABSTRACT

This digest reviews educational policies and practices that have been proven effective in closing the achievement gap, offering a list of resources with detailed information about them. The digest focuses on state and district roles (e.g., developing and implementing educational goals, rigorous standards, and accountability standards and providing human resources materials necessary for student success); early childhood development initiatives (providing high-quality preschool programs, parent education programs, and family literacy programs); school climate (e.g., actively promoting the expectation that all children can succeed, identifying and developing every student's potential, and recognizing diverse cultures); school organization (providing full desegregation, smaller classes, and equitable grouping of students); teaching and learning (e.g., providing increased instructional time, using challenging curricula and instructional strategies, and providing access to college-based programs); school management (e.g., recruiting and retaining highly-qualified teachers and administrators, providing ongoing professional development, and encouraging parents' high expectations); and community involvement (e.g., maintaining a culture where learning and achievement are valued, providing learning opportunities, and maintaining active school partnerships). (SM)

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by

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CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP: PRINCIPLES FOR IMPROVING THE EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS OF ALL STUDENTS

School efforts to close the gap in academic achievement between ethnic and racial minority students and white students have been largely unsuccessful to date; differences in educational performance persist at all achievement levels, with the gap greatest between students of color and immigrants and their white and Asian American peers at high achievement levels. The need for a solution to this problem has new urgency now—here in the increasingly diverse United States—as the relationship between educational success and social and economic opportunity steadily strengthens and the relationship between educational differences and social conflict becomes more manifest.

Fortunately, there is now also greater potential for closing the achievement gap as a new resolve to do so takes hold. An upsurge in concrete steps to improve minority achievement in schools across the nation is encouraging, since the efforts are knowledge based—informed by the existence of proven and promising strategies and by new research pointing to additional innovative measures. Moreover, it is now widely recognized that schools, communities, and families must be committed to the achievement of all children, must begin educating them when they are very young, and must make a long-term commitment to educational improvement. Creating an overall atmosphere for children that reflects these principles is becoming a priority nationally, and a wide range of supportive resources are being deployed.

This digest briefly reviews the educational policies and practices whose effectiveness in closing the achievement gap has been shown, and provides a list of resources offering detailed information about them. One resource is the Internet pathway, *Closing the Achievement Gap*, developed by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, on which the digest is based. Previously published Clearinghouse digests also cover some of the specific principles in more depth, and future digests will explore additional principles.

State and District Role

- ***Development and implementation of education goals*** which reflect the desires, needs, and values of the public, schools, and parents, and which will generate a shared commitment to education excellence.
- ***Development and implementation of rigorous standards*** that form the basis of curriculum development and instructional practice, specify students' competencies by subject and grade, and define the performance and responsibilities of school administrators and teachers.
- ***Development and implementation of accountability standards*** to ensure the high quality and good performance of all administrators and educators.
- ***Dissemination of existing researched-based instructional programs*** with demonstrated success to individual schools for adaption, as appropriate, and dissemination of information about effective instructional strategies and exemplary practices that are especially effective in diverse classrooms.
- ***Provision of human and material resources*** necessary for successful student learning.
- ***Provision of opportunities for sharing information, experiences, and problem solving*** across schools and levels.

Early Childhood Development Initiatives

- ***Provision of high quality preschool programs*** that foster young children's development of social and school readiness skills, develop their interest in learning, and orient them toward academic achievement; and active recruitment of families to a local program.
- ***Provision of parent education programs***, social service resources, and, possibly, financial support to help families learn how to make a concrete commitment to their children's academic success while they are still very young, to teach families to promote children's cognitive and social development and improve their homes as a learning environment, and to encourage families to take advantage of school and community resources that support achievement.
- ***Provision of family literacy programs.***

School Climate

- ***Active promotion of the expectation that all students can succeed***, the demand that they do so, and encouragement to prepare for higher education.
- ***Maintenance of a school climate conducive to academic productivity*** by orienting students' attitudes and behavior to excellence and giving them a sense of efficacy and power, and by directing their time to productive academic exercises, such as inquiry, seeking and using help, and learning.
- ***Identification and development of every student's potential*** through individualized assessments, appropriate placements, and ongoing encouragement from school staff.
- ***Recognition of diverse cultures*** as components of the mainstream and establishment of a balance between students' native ways of communicating, learning, and behaving and the need for them to be educated, contribute positively to the school environment, and develop the skills for professional and social success in adulthood.
- ***Maintenance of a safe and orderly school*** where staff and students demonstrate respect for each other and are free of fear; and where the code of conduct is well-publicized, fair, and uniformly enforced.

School Organization

- ***Full desegregation*** of all school classes, programs, and extracurricular activities.
- ***Smaller classes***, preferably with 18 or fewer students and particularly in the earlier grades.

- ***Equitable grouping of students*** that places students of color, in proportion to their numbers, in high ability classes in the early grades and in higher tracks and college preparatory classes in high school.

Teaching and Learning

- ***Provision of increased instructional time*** in reading, mathematics, and other basic skills.
- ***Use of challenging curricula and instructional strategies*** that engage students' interest, promote inquiry and discovery, and provide students with a sense of satisfaction from their own efforts.
- ***Provision of learning resources***, such as reading specialists; computer technology and staff trained in its use; and books for a student library, advanced textbooks, consumable workbooks, and other high quality print materials.
- ***Operation of magnet high schools and special subject-specific programs*** to promote learning by tapping into students' particular interests.
- ***Provision of supplemental individualized education supports***, including tutoring by professionals or trained adult volunteers and peers; after-school, weekend, and summer programs; and intensive in-school aid for retained students.
- ***Provision of access to college-based programs*** and professionals who can serve as role models and mentors.
- ***Application of in-depth, appropriate, and ongoing assessments*** of the performance and progress of each student—including grades, test scores, classroom behavior, extracurricular activities, and conduct—to determine class and program placement and the types of individual supports should be given.

School Management

- ***Recruitment and retention of experienced, well-qualified teachers*** for students at all ability levels, who have excellent teaching skills and a good command of their subject specialties and are held accountable for students' performance.
- ***Recruitment and retention of high-performing administrators*** who provide pedagogical leadership, require the preparedness and efficacy of the teachers, and are held accountable for all their responsibilities.
- ***Provision of required ongoing professional development*** to help teachers master new curricula and teaching strategies, especially those effective in diverse classrooms; improve students' ability to meet standards; treat and challenge all students equally; internalize and convey the fact that race and ethnicity do not affect achievement; and share and solve problems.
- ***Application of state-, district-, and school-developed standards*** to curriculum and instruction design, student assessment, and teacher evaluation.
- ***Decision making based on data collection and analysis***, including review of schoolwide data—current and past test scores, course enrollment patterns, and disciplinary actions—and a comparison of the data with those of other students, schools, and areas to help determine what overall school changes are likely to improve student performance.

Family Supports

- ***Active encouragement of parents' high expectations*** for their children's achievement, involvement in their children's schooling, development of a home atmosphere conducive to learning, participation in homework completion, and commitment to help them meet performance standards, through social functions, meetings, and workshops where the family role in educational success is described.
- ***Encouragement of parents' participation in school events*** through a decrease in barriers by provision of babysitting, a meal, transportation aid, etc.
- ***Provision of education, health, and social services*** to students and their parents, preferably in a central location, via a case management approach.

Community Involvement

- ***Maintenance of a culture where learning and achievement are valued*** that is sustained and supported by religious and social organizations and the media.
- ***Provision of learning opportunities*** at local libraries, museums, and other cultural institutions.
- ***Provision of coordinated services designed to support students' educational achievement and their parents' ability to foster their children's learning,*** such as physical and mental health care, adult education, and financial assistance.
- ***Maintenance of active school partnerships*** that include helping schools link families with local social services; providing students with mentors, tutors, and role models; providing parents with adult basic skills education, job training, and parenting classes; and fund raising to increase the resources available to local schools.
- ***Organization of leisure activities with an academic focus.***

Resources

Efforts to close the achievement gap have intensified in the last several years, and the experiences of districts and school with notable successes are beginning to appear in the education literature.

An excellent source for these reports is the **ERIC database**. The world's most extensive collection of materials on education, the database is a component of the ERIC system, a national information service funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement of the U.S. Department of Education. The ERIC database can be accessed on the Internet:

http://askeric.org/Eric/

Some of these reports, along with additional research-based informational materials, can be accessed through the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education's pathway, *Closing the Achievement Gap*, on its web site, **UEweb**:

http://eric-web.tc.columbia.edu

One specific publication series worth noting consists of a national and state-by-state statistical representation and comparison of the achievement gap: *2001 Education Trust State Summaries*, was prepared by The Education Trust, Washington, DC, and produced for *EdWatch Online* (www.edtrust.org).

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